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ABSTRACT

This lecture is accompanied by slides of India. The lecture is used an introduction to the first of the three videotapes of Peter Brook's "Mahabharata," providing students with preliminary background on Hinduism and on the Hindu epic. The objective is also to have students think about the basic values of ancient and modern Hindus. (EH)

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India - Mahabharata

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Fulbright-Hays Seminar Curriculum Project

Carole and Pasquale DeVito

Objective: To show students the first of the three videotapes of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, providing them with preliminary background on Hinduism and on the epic, and have them think about the basic values of ancient and modern Hindus.

Strategy: -Deliver this lecture to students as preparation for the performance
-Show Videotape
-discuss the whole, using the questions at the end as guidelines

This lecture should be accompanied by slides. Information at the end of this paper indicates how you can order the slides and videotape.

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When a group of Fulbright teachers were in India in the summer of 94, they visited the Jamnabai Narsee School in Bombay. Located in suburban Bombay, it is an independent school offering classes from Kindergarten through the end of high school. It prides itself in its high academic standards.

They asked the Head of the school, and you can see a slide of her here (Slide 1), if the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were taught in her school, since many American students read versions of the *Ramayana*. She said, no, because in her school students come into school having grown up on these epics, and they are a part of everyone's life and consciousness. Even when they are not Hindu. Look at Mrs. in her office. She herself is a Zoorastrian, and yet behind her is a statue of the Ganesha, the elephant headed god you will hear about shortly, and the goddess Sarasvati, a Hindu goddess of learning and wisdom. Every day she lays out devotional flowers around her many statues. And so it is all over India: the many gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion permeate all facets of life and have profound personal meaning for the people.

Now, for you, the *Mahabharata* is a foreign story which you are most likely learning about for the first time. Your counterparts in India have been hearing these stories and reading comic books such as these since their earliest years. (slide 2)

So today I'd like to give you some background on the epic and on the Hindu traditions that gave birth to it, so that you may better understand and enjoy this taped version.

The *Mahabharata* is a compendium of 100,000 verses, ten times as long as the Iliad and the Odyssey combined, and about 15 times as long as the Bible. It was probably composed between 300 BC and 300 AD. *Mahabharata* literally means "the great history of the Bharati, a family or clan." It is the story of a historical war between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. This story, besides being a good adventure story, is also told as a symbol of the inner laws that rule humanity. War represents the eternal battle between good and evil, between the gods and demons, or the inner struggle within the lives of every man and woman. The main story is interwoven with many myths, dynastic histories, explicit recipes for ritual offerings, philosophical arguments, and discussions of caste law. So as well as being the history of a family, it is the history of mankind.

The story begins with the story teller Vyasa announcing that he is going to tell a child, and by extension all of us, the history of his people. Listen to the opening of the epic: Vyasa: Do you know how to write?...I'm Ganesha, the bringer of peace." (either act this out, or show the opening of the tape) In Hindu mythology, there are three main gods, Shiva the Destroyer, Vishnu the Preserver, and Brahma, the Creator. (slide 3) They are all aspects or faces of Brahman, the Principle of Truth and the single unifying power in the universe. This spirit pervades all of life, and manifests itself in the hundreds of Hindu Gods, and in all humans as well. Just the way these three gods are represented as unified, so all of life is unified as well. Here in this statue you see Shiva and Parvati (slide 4), the parents of Ganesha. Notice how close and loving they are. One story tells of Ganesha sitting between his two parents, and when they both leaned down to kiss him, he started dancing so that their lips met each other's and he could enjoy seeing them kissing each other. You'll see a slide of the dancing Ganesha later. He is one of the favorite Hindu Gods. There are statues of him all over India, and he always is thought to bring good luck. (slide 5) He was known as the remover of all obstacles, and divine patron of literature and the arts, and God of good beginnings. His form symbolizes the unity of the human (microcosm) with the divine (the macrocosm). Notice that his bulging belly has a distinctly elephantine appearance, while his head has a human appearance. This is a physical manifestation of the mixing of the divine and the human.

Shiva and Parvati can be represented as unified in one figure (slide 6). Here you can see very clearly how masculine and feminine are aspects of one unified being, just as all gods are aspects of the same divine spirit. This is also expressed abstractly by the symbolic lingam and yoni (slide 7), which are seen all over India and represent the

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unity of the male and female creative powers. Likewise, all humans are unified with the divine spirit: they have inside of them a little piece of Brahman, called atman. So when Vyasa tells the boy that the story "is about you," in many ways it can be seen to mean that any story about the Gods and heros is about all of us, since we all come from one universal spirit. And it also says, that if you really understand the *Mahabharata*, you will not only hear about yourself, but you will be changed by your new understanding. The *Mahabharata* will show you ways to live according to Hindu teachings. So the god and heros are masks behind which we see our own faces, making mistakes but also demonstrating the right ways to live.

Another way of picturing this unending cycle of life and death is by this most popular of Hindu symbols, a wheel. (slide 8) Hindus call this endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth Samsara.

To a Hindu, everything that is born dies and is reborn. When a person dies, his atman is reborn into a new body. In this statue of the Dancing Shiva (the god of destruction), (slide 9) Shiva has four arms, and dances with one foot firmly planted on a demon. This demon represents man's ego. The ego is insignificant compared to the atman, but it has demoniac qualities. There is a snake around Shiva's neck: this represents man's lower nature, which man must conquer. Shiva's total mastery over the snake is represented here. A ring of flames encompasses him. This flame signifies the number of creatures of this world; it comes from the original source of all creation, Brahman. His upper right hand carries a small drum known as the damaru, shaped like an hour-glass; it regulates the rhythm of the dance. The upper left hand makes a half-moon posture with its fingers; it bears on its palm a tongue of flame. The drum signifies creation, the flame destruction. The continuous chain of creation and destruction maintains the universe. Shiva looks calm, even though he is in action, that shows that the supreme tranquility of the Atman. Shiva's hair is matted, showing his austerities. In his hair is a often represented a small personification of the river Ganges. This statue not only tells of the eternal cycle of life from destruction to rebirth. It also tells you as a human being what your goals in life should be: to conquer your spiritual ignorance and thrill in self-realization. You must only let one aspect of your personality deal with the world below while concentrating on your higher self. The beauty of life is to conquer your desires and realize your godhead, and to dance in the ecstasy of this realization. Since all life comes from Brahman, you become brahman when this happens.

You will see in the *Mahabharata* great importance attached to fire, earth, and water. As you saw in the Shiva Nataraj, Shiva is said to have received the waters of the great river in his hair, because their power would have destroyed humanity. Shiva releases them, and in doing so

also releases ultimate truth. In this statue of Ganga, goddess of water (slide 10), you see a representation of this powerful concept. The sea is the womb of the Hindu universe, and to return to the sea is to die. Cosmic waters represent order, and when churned into chaos, they represent life forces. Remember that fire surrounds Shiva Nataraj even while the water flows from his hair. Both of these elements bring life and death: water sustains life but can also destroy it, as does fire. Here you see people bathing in the Ganges (slide 11); notice that there are fires from cremation pyres on the banks of the river, the ultimate combination of fire and water.

Your job as a human being is to fulfill three goals dharma (duty), artha (profit) and kama (pleasure) (slide 12) This means that during most of your life you should do your dharma, your duty to your family within the context of the caste in which you are born. It is this behavior that keeps the universe in order; artha enables you to get out in the work and make profit for yourself and your family, and Kama enables you to follow your pleasure and make children. At a certain stage in your life, when your grandchildren are well on their way to maturity, you can abandon your family and search for moksha. What is moksha? It is the final release from samsara, which you may achieve at the end of your life by becoming an ascetic, renouncing the material pleasures of your existence, and going out to the forest. In this way, you will get closer to your true inner spirit, and it will be released from samsara and will unite with Brahman when you die. Here is a slide of an Indian in this stage of life. (slide 13)

Hindus also believe that all of us are born into a certain caste. There are four main castes They are the Brahmins, or priests, (slide 14), the Kshatriyas, or warriors/princes, (slide 15), Vaishas, or businessmen (slide 16), and Shudras, or workers (slide 17). Each of these 7castes has certain duties that it must perform. A warrior must act like a warrior, a priest a priest. It is wrong for either to act like the other. In a later part of the *Mahabharata* that takes place after the episodes in this tape, the hero and warrior Arjuna has second thoughts about doing his dharma as a warrior. (slide 18) In this part of the epic, called the *Bhagavad Gita*, the God Krishna, acting as his charioteer, persuades Arjuna that it is his duty to be a warrior, regardless of the consequences of his action.

Who is this God Krishna? Hindus believe that the God Vishnu, one of the three main gods I showed you earlier, comes down to earth whenever the survival of humanity is at stake, and restores earth to balance. (slide 19) You can see him here surrounded by images of the various forms (incarnations) that he took when he came to earth. A fish, a tortoise, a Boar, a swarf, Rama, etc. Here as a boar, he came to rescue earth from the depths of primordial ocean, divide the earth into 7 continents, and give it life. (slide 20)

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As Krishna, he came to bring love and wisdom to mankind. Stories abound about Krishna, and he is much beloved in India. (slide 21)

The basic plot of the *Mahabharata* goes like this: A king called Santanu (or Vicitraviya) takes as his first wife Ganga, the goddess of the sacred river, Ganges. This goddess gives him a wonderful son, Bhishma, "the most perfect man." For his second wife, Santanu takes Satyavati ("truth"), who was born in a fish. At the time of her marriage to Santanu, Satyavati is already the mother of Vyasa, the author of the poem, who thus has very close family ties with his own characters. He had been conceived in Maya between the shores of a river; to Hindus, Maya means illusion, or the foggy confusion in which mortals exist since they don't grasp the world of the gods.

Santanu and Satyavati have a son who is sickly, and dies childless, leaving two young widows. Satyavati is concerned that the line will die out, so she consults Bhishma. Bhishma and Satyavati decide to find someone else to impregnate the two queens: Ambika and Ambalika, meaning little mother and dear little mother, will get children with Vyasa, a sage, the earlier son of Satyavati, and the narrator of the story. Notice some important themes here: a woman in the field in which the man sows his seed; it is man's duty to have a son, to satisfy his dharma. If some misfortune prevented a man from having a son with his wife, he could have a son from his brother and wife.

Vyasa agrees, since he realizes that this is in keeping with dharma: keeping dharma, profit, and pleasure separate. He says, "Anyone who sees into these three - dharma, profit, pleasure; who sees that profit depends on profit, dharma depends on dharma, and pleasure depends on pleasure, but that separately they run contrary to one another; and who discriminates correctly between them after thinking about it carefully - he is an intelligent man. This will be in keeping with dharma and for the welfare of our family."

However, he is unattractive, still having some lingering fish smell from Satyavati. So, as they resist him, he curses them, and Ambika, also called Kausalya, gives birth to a blind son, Dhritarashhtra, the blind father of the Kauravas. Vyasa predicted that Dhritarashtra will have the energy of a million elephants, will be a wise royal seer, with great fortune, great heroism, and great intelligence; he will have a hundred powerful sons... but he will be blind because of his mother's deficiency. He marries Gandhari, and they have the 100 sons. Duryodhana is the first born, and he desires to rule the earth. Also, there is the vicious Duhsassana, and a fearsome warrior Karna. (slide 22) Here you see Drona and Karna fighting the Pandavas.

Since a blind person could not be king, Bhishma and Satyavati persuaded Vyasa to give Ambalika a child. She turned pale at the sight of him, leaving a son called pale

(Pandu) Pandu marries Kunti, and then later Madri. Because of a curse, he cannot father children. However, the gods intervene, and his wives father the five Pandovas (slide 23), who were great archers. One of the sons, Yudhishthira, whose mother was Kunti, was fathered by Dharma, the God of earthly harmony. He was pious, wise and gentle. Bhima, son of the wind, was strong as thunder, thick-headed, and of large appetite. Arjuna, the son of Kunti and Indra, was able, generous and brave, the perfect warrior. Two other brothers, Nakula and Sahadeva, are sons of Madri and symbolize patience and wisdom.

In the story, the Kauravas represent evil, the Pandavas good. There are many negative attachments but few (five) paths to righteousness. They are all first cousins, and are brought up together under the guidance of the elderly Bhishma. However, they have difficulty living together.

Draupadi comes of age and her father holds an archery contest; Arjuna won; the brothers share her amongst themselves. She represents the palm, and they the five fingers, and also the five senses, and also the mind, emotions, strength, knowledge, and wisdom.

They try to get along, and one of the five Pandova brothers even accepts a worthless part of the Kingdom in order to preserve peace. Yudishthira is crowned King of Kings. In order to subvert this, the Kauravas invite the Pandavas to a gambling match (slide 24). The Pandavas lose, but Draupadi experiences the miracle of the sari, helped by Krishna. Krishna in the *Mahabharata* is a friend of the Pandavas.

The Pandavas go into a thirteen year exile. Then they come back to claim their inheritance. At the big battle of Kurukshetra, 18 days long, the Kauravas are defeated (slide 25) The Pandavas return to rule, living 36 years. At the end of their lives, they decide to renounce the world. They go to Himalayas, four brothers and Draupadi die, but Yudhishthira makes it. He enters paradise with his dog; he reanimates the deceased brothers.

(Slide 26) Here is Arjuna having a vision of Krishna as the unified universe. It's part of his awakening to wisdom in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Notice the symbol in the middle, the Om. It is the primordial symbol of creation. the syllable that stands for the whole universe. It's (slide 27) that sound that I end with, and remind you to watch the *Mahabharata* remembering these themes of unity and inseparability, and to enjoy the play and all the exciting adventures it recounts.

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Sample discussion questions after the video tape:

1. Where do you see examples of the importance of water? of fire?

2. What role does Caste play in the decisions and actions of the characters?

3. What role does dharma play in the unfolding of the plot, or in decisions of the characters?

4. What is the overall nature of the Kauravas? The Pandavas? Can they be defined as all good or bad? If not, what mixtures do you see?

5. What is the role of the Gods in the lives of the heros?

6. What role do women play in relationship to men? to the family? to dharma?

7. Can you predict what will happen next?

8. What might the Game of Dice Represent?

8. What lessons do we learn about good behavior and bad behavior in this play?

9. In what ways do you see themes of the unity of life play out in this section of the epic?

10. Why is violence and conflict so much a part of this story?

11. In what ways are the situations faced by the heros of the *Mahabharata* similar to and different from those faced by heros in other traditions?

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The videotape of Peter Brook's performances should be available from your local library or video service. There were three parts, filmed and aired on Public TV. These were widely available. Recently, a two-part condensed version has been marketed, available from Facets, 1517 Tell Ave, Chicago, Illinois 60614.

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Slides

A set of copies of these slides may be obtained by writing to Carole DeVito, The Dwight-Englewood School, 315 East Palisade Ave, Englewood, N.J. 07631, at a cost of $30.00

Slides:

1. Head of Jammnabai Narsee School. Source: Carole DeVito

2. Cover of Comic Book, Source: Mahabharata, Part I, Delhi, Dreamland Publications.

3. Trimurti, Source: FMR 1991, p.109.

4. Shiva and Parvati, Source: Blurton, p. 97.

5. Ganesha, Source: Shearer, cover.

6. Ardhanarishvara, Source: Shearer, p. 12.

7. Lingham and Yoni, Source: Carole DeVito

8. Wheel, Konarak, Source: Ions, pp. 76-77.

9. Dancing Shiva, Source: The World History Slide Collection U 29

10. Ganga, Source: Blurton, fig. 33

11. Bathers at the Ganges, Source: Carole DeVito

12. Chart, Source: Johnson et al, p. 107

13. Sadhu, Source: Carole DeVito

14. Brhmin at Temple In Madras, Source: Carole DeVito

15. Drawing of Kshatriyas, Calcutta, The World History Slide Collection, U 07

16. Indian Merchants, Madras, Source: Carole DeVito

17. Farmer plowing his fields, Aurangabad, Source: Carole DeVito

18. Mahabarata war Painting. Thanjavur Painting. Source:Jagannathan p. 55

19. Vishnu in the Center of his Avatars, Jaipur,Source: Ions, p. 50.

20. Vishnu as Varaha, the Boar, Source: Ions, p. 51

21. Krishna, Delhi Museum, Source: Carole DeVito

22. Drona and Karna Fighting Arjuna and Bhima, Source: Ions, p. 10.

23. The Pandovas with Draupadi, Source: Mahbharata, Part 1. p. 15.

24. The Game of Dice, Source: **Mahabharata**, part 5, p. 16.

25. Pandavas and Kauras at Battle, Source: Ions, p. 35.

26. Arjuna has Vision of Universal Form, Source: FMR, p. 105

27. Om, Source: Carole DeVito

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